

The Christmas spirit, customs, celebrations

Although there is no satisfactory proof of the exact date of Christ's birth, and even though his birth was not celebrated amongst early Christians, Christmas is celebrated widely today all over the world.

These Christmas celebrations date back to 354 A.D. when the new pope of Rome, Liberius, ordered his people to celebrate 25th of December as the birth of Christ. Before that time, the 25th of December was held as the birth of the unconquered sun, part of the pagan celebrations of the Romans' favorite feast, the Saturnalia. The Christmas customs, such as the decorations, candles, ivy and others were of a pre-Christian origin, mostly descendant from pagan, seasonal, religious and national practices. Today, "commercial practices" could also be added to that list. Christmas celebrations vary from one country to another. The "Christmas spirit" means different things to different people, even within one country. Let's take a look at how some Lago employees celebrate the holiday season.

Bianca Croes

Music and joy are the two things that Bianca most relates to the holiday season. "Since I was a child, my family would get together to play music, sing and dance. We would always visit my grandfather ("Mo Tito") who plays dande, so I learned to dance to dande music since I was small."

Bianca finds the preparations for the celebrations exciting:

"We get together to make ayacas for the whole family and we start decorating the house in early December. On Christmas Eve we go to church, to heighten our Christmas spirit."

As for New Year's after the church bells toll twelve times to announce the end of the old and the beginning of the new, and after the fireworks are thrown, Bianca together with her family follow a unique family

tradition: while enjoying a glass of champagne, each member of the family eats 12 grapes, one grape to give good fortune to each month of the year

Then, the dandes of her now deceased grandfather are played, after which her family visits the neighbours bringing them 12 grapes for good fortune also



After the fireworks are thrown, Bianca and her family traditionally eat 12 grapes, one grape to give good fortune to each month of the New Year

Modesto Ruiz (Dedechi)

"If I don't attend mass on Christmas Eve. I don't feel I celebrate Christmas." To Modesto, Christmas is first of all a religious celebration. He and his wife and three children attend the early morning mass, at 5:00 a.m., from the 16th of December until Christmas, every day.

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Dande: an Aruban tradition

Dande: a typical New Year tradition, bringing music and joy, that has existed for at least over 150 years in Aruba. "Dande" - which has probably been derived from the word "dandaré", meaning: going from one place to the other - has traditionally consisted of a group of seven to nine persons, visiting from house to house with their musical instruments, right after midnight on New Year's day, to play songs of well-wishes to the families in Aruba.

Together with the Dande were a lot of other traditions and superstitions that were celebrated on New Year's day Imagine it is 1883, one hundred years ago, at about 11:30 p.m., half an hour before the midnight of January 31st. At about that time in the Aruban house, the mother would be busy sweeping once more the already clean house, and filling the house with essence to do away with all the bad spirits of the "old year". Everyone is dressed in his new suit. All doors and windows are opened and at about two minutes before 12 midnight, each family member stands outside, in front of the door, to "receive" the New Year. Each of them holds

a coin in the left hand to live up to the superstition that "if the New Year finds you with a coin, you will gain many more in the year to come".

After New Year is announced and congratulations are exchanged, the father followed by the mother and then the children, enter the house, with the right foot first. The children then knee on a pillow in front of their parents to receive their blessings. Then, after the drinks are served and all the fireworks (European) are thrown, the family is ready to receive the Dande

The most exciting moment of the celebration has arrived. One that brings music, joy and, hopefully, blessings for the New Year. Most families are more than eager to receive a Dande, at least one. When the group arrives, everyone dressed in suits, one of the integrants knocks on a window (not a door), to take down the names of every family member. Then they stand in front of the door, outside of the house (never inside) and start playing (or as they say, "making the Dande cry" with the violin),

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"Attending mass and listening to aguinaldos and other Christmas songs form our Christmas spirit. Besides, it is pleasant to meet people so early in the morning."

Although Modesto lives in Seroe Colorado, he traditionally attends the St. Anna Church in Noord where he grew up. Having dinner with ayacas and ham, giving gifts, buying new things, and visiting family, may not come first place for Modesto, but "they are an essential part of our Christmas traditions", and as such, he takes part in all of those also.

Before welcoming the New Year, Modesto and family eat "old year's food" at his mother's house

Carlos Rasmijn

For Carlos, Christmas and New Year's will be quite different and special this year. "This year my wife and I will be celebrating the holiday season with a special Christmas present, our first baby, a precious girl, who was born on December 13."

Carlos, who used to work as a discjockey as a hobby, feels that music is what contributes the most to the holiday season spirit. "Fortunately, Dande festivals are held annually to keep the Dande tradition alive. We should do the same with aguinaldos. Maybe the schools and offices should start forming their own groups to keep the spirit alive."

"Formerly people used to decorate their houses quite a bit. Now it's not the same anymore. That's why I think we should keep the music alive, otherwise it would be difficult to get into the Christmas spirit."

Mike Geerman

"I find that the Christmas spirit is not penetrating this year. It's different than other years. To feel the spirit, we need more music, and decorations. For me and my family it's a day to eat and dance. We eat goat or lamb soup after the Christmas midnight mass and again at noon-time on the 25th." Other than that, it is a regular day for Mike.



To reflect on past Christmases, Gerry Bailey and his family spend some time after the Christmas Eve mass to look at old photos and slides.

Raymond Bailey

For Gerry, his wife and two children, Christmas is a special time, "the high point of our religion and the whole year. It is a time to think back on the many blessings we've received, to rekindle our love for our fellow human beings in care and thoughts."

As a family they attend church on Christmas Eve and return to the house to reflect on past Christmases. They spend some time together looking at old photographs and slides, seeing how people and places have changed. The 25th is a "big restful day" when they have dinner with some friends. Gerry's children who are in school in the United States will be returning to Aruba in time to decorate the tree and "to make our home look brighter and more cheerful".

For the Bailey's, the beginning of the New Year is "a chance to think about the future, with new hopes, dreams, and plans"

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asking God to bless the home and family members, calling them each by name. Of course, the singer has to take off his hat, for respect. The hosts usually throw some money in the hat as a contribution for the high cost of the instruments. Once the Dande group has asked for everyone's blessing, it enters the house to play three dance songs. Before the Dande leaves to visit the next house though, they have to drink or eat that which is offered to them by the hosts. Often, the Dande groups would walk 15 to 20 miles to give a Dande. And this they would do until the 6th of January.

Although times have changed and traditions have evolved, the Dande has survived. To encourage the tradition, Dande festivals were organized about ten years ago. These festivals gave a real boost to the traditions, and are now a successful part of the annual celebrations. The basic instruments used over a century ago are still used today: the violin (which has to be a little out of tune to sound right for Dande), the tambú and the wiri. Over the years, the guitar, maraca, cuarta, mandolin and (hand-)accordion were added. Now, in the festivals, even the electric base is used.

Many are the theories as to the origin of the Dande. Some contend it is African, others that it is Latin-American, and still others that it is a combination of various influences. In any case, wherever Dande may have originated from, it has since long evolved into a genuine Aruban tradition.

Dande is just that kind of familiar music, with a sentimental tingle, perhaps a little sadness for the year that has passed, and at the same time an expression of hope for the future

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